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Issues in Vendor-Library Relations

Excuses, Excuses — Shipping Books on Time

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by Barry Fast

As library book budgets have tightened over the years, fewer libraries have the resources to buy books primarily to support generalized research collections. Increasingly, libraries buy books to support specific teaching or research programs. Collections are more narrowly focused at most institutions, and "on-demand" purchasing is increasing. These orders, placed at the specific request of faculty or collection management librarians, and generated to fulfill specific needs in the short term, require fast fulfillment.

Library booksellers can do much to improve turnaround time on fulfillment. When one examines the steps a library bookseller takes to fulfill an order, it becomes obvious that even reducing a particular process or task by just a few minutes will have a significant positive effect on turnaround time. Envision these steps: orders are received, either by mail (still the majority)

or electronically. Orders are edited, where an experienced person examines each order for obvious errors or problems. Orders are input to the computer system, which entails careful reference to each library's particular specifications (invoicing, cancel dates, fund management, etc). Books are picked from stock, or orders are generated to the publishers, and sent either electronically or by mail. Book deliveries are received by mail, by UPS or by common carrier. They are priced from publisher invoices, and status reports are noted to be sent to customers. Wrong books, damaged or defective books are handled and the correct title reordered. Books are sorted by customer and billed and boxed according to instructions. Finally, boxes of books leave the warehouse destined for libraries all over the world by a variety of delivery systems, from air freight to UPS to US mail to international bag mail. The amount of handling, most often for indi-

vidual titles from thousands of publishers destined to hundreds of libraries, is a small miracle of logistics.

The library bookseller community began to recognize the need for delivery speed in the mid 1980s. Not only was the internal efficient handling of books an emerging requirement of customers, but the business world in general began to make the association of total quality with cost reduction. Total quality means that each stage of a particular process, whether in manufacturing or service industries, requires a commitment to the elimination of redundancies, attention to detail, correction of errors as soon as they are discovered, and the flattening of management and supervision to the lowest level in the hierarchical organization. In fact, hierarchy is an impediment to quality because the people responsible for particular tasks

"In fact, hierarchy is an impediment to quality ..."

are empowered to be fully responsible for quality in those tasks.

We learned something very interesting about quality, and its resulting improvement in delivery speed: Very little of this had anything to do with computers and had everything to do with people. Certainly there were obvious immediate improvements both in efficiency and turnaround time that could be associated with computer enhancements, but each of these were one time events, giving a boost to efficiency or eliminating a time-consuming step in book handling. The ongoing, gradual, continuing overall improvements result from better trained, better motivated people with a real interest and commitment to their work.

You have heard many of us in the bookseller community talk about this at Charleston and write about it here, in our own company communications, and in other forums. What we rarely discuss, however, is the single remaining impediment to consistently quick turnaround time. When we do our very best on internal efficiency, we are still dependent on publishers' deliveries to us. And publishers vary greatly in their turnaround time on our orders.

We at Academic

Book Center keep careful track of turnaround time from publishers. I know other booksellers maintain similar records, and it is often the subject of discussion among booksellers and publishers' representatives. Most often, when a librarian calls us to task for a slow delivery problem we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of offering this lame-sounding excuse: "The publisher still has not shipped our order." This sounds like "the dog ate my homework".

But he really did. Here are some examples from the statistics we keep at Academic Book Center. These are the weighted average number of days between Academic sending the order to the publishers and their books, or a valid status report, arriving in our warehouse. A valid status report is defined by us as — "not yet published," "out of stock at the publisher," or some other equally definitive indication of the book's non-availability. We know librarians want the book, or want to know why they don't have it, as soon as possible.

We use the services of Ingram for many trade books, paperbacks, and other titles that they stock and give discounts that are comparable to the publishers'. We order from Ingram electronically, and their huge Oregon warehouse, servicing most of the west coast, delivers our books within three days of order placement. That's great service! If Ingram can deliver so quickly from its stock, why can't publishers? Assuming a publisher has the book in its warehouse, why does it take weeks for some of them to ship?

Among the very best publishers, in terms of turnaround time, are Henry Holt and Macmillan, both of whom get us their titles within seven days. Eight day wonders are Irwin, W H Freeman, Libraries Unlimited and Island Press. There are four publishers who average nine days: Academic Press, Human Kinetics, William C. Brown, and National Textbook. At ten days, well within acceptable turnaround time, are lots of biggies: Prentice Hall, HarperCollins, Routledge, Random House, CRC, Garland, Harcourt Brace, Stanford, Michigan (the fastest university presses), Kendall/Hunt, William Morrow, RR Donnelley, National Academy, and good old Publishers Group West stocking many small presses and obviously providing a great service for them. Oxford UP, Simon & Schuster, Wadsworth, International Thompson and Bantam-Doubleday-Dell join Duke, University of Missouri and

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another fine small press distributor, ISBS, with an average turnaround time of 11 days. Publishers with turnaround times averaging two weeks include Lawrence Erlbaum, Taylor & Francis, Facts On File, JAI, Edwin Mellon, Norton, Springer Verlag, Kluwer, Lynne Rienner, McGraw Hill, Penguin, Farrar Straus, Addison Wesley, Sage, Saint Martin's and many university presses such as Harvard, MIT, SUNY, Kansas, Chicago, Cornell, Hawaii, California, New York, Texas, New Mexico, North Carolina and Cambridge. I think we can all agree that these publishers provide excellent service.

There are many publishers with a turnaround time of three weeks or less, and this timeframe seems to me to be the reasonable limit. Three weeks enables those publishers


who can only accept mailed purchase orders to react promptly to booksellers. Among these are DeGruyter, Noyes Data, Plenum, Little Brown, Blackwell Scientific, Basil Blackwell, ME Sharpe, American Chemical Society, and some university presses including Yale (Harvard beat you), Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Iowa, Indiana and Rutgers.

"Very little of [increased quality] had anything to do with computers and had everything to do with people."

While not outstanding, these publishers provide adequate service on turnaround time.

This leaves thousands of publishers with slow fulfillment. Fortunately, many of the books that libraries buy are from the publishers named above, and dozens of smaller presses that space does not permit listing. Among the larger publishers who need to

improve service, with their average fulfillment days in parentheses are Gale (22) and Elsevier (26). These publishers are not by any means giving poor service, but it would help everyone if they could reduce delivery time by a week or two.

With thousands of publishers taking four, five and six or more weeks to fill orders, one has to lament the waste generated, waste that you pay for. Books that sit in a warehouse for extra weeks are consuming cashflow and increasing borrowing, a real cost. Books that take extra weeks to deliver indicate management and shipping systems that must be wasteful in more ways than just time. The question that needs an answer is: If Ingram can ship within twenty-four hours the books it stocks from hundreds of publishers, why can't publishers ship their own books that quickly? 

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journals take even longer to sell due to lengthy negotiations for site licenses. Fisher thinks electronic journals require a different sales approach. MIT gives free samples, discounts the first year's price, and offers incentives for group buys either through library consortia or for a single library buying a group of titles.

Daniel Jones asked: "Who is the customer — the library, reader or author?" He believes that publishers have viewed libraries as an open checkbook and that serials prices have been increasing at an unreasonably high rate. Journals prices have increased at a rate of 16% in 1996 when the CPI has only increased between 3% and 4%. Because 90% of his budget is spent on serials (which he hopes to reduce to 85%), Jones has to carefully consider whether the usage and cost per use is worth the price of the subscription. If the cost per use is over \$50, he cancels. Jones recommends that to avoid cancellation, keep the price low but keep the editorial quality high so that the journal gets used. Jones only subscribes to a new journal if an old one is canceled. And to survive, a journal must be indexed. Publishing a journal on schedule is a significant factor when deciding whether to cut a subscription. Librarians might assume that irregularly published journals mean the field itself does not produce enough research to warrant its own journal. Journals are supposed to publish research quickly and lengthy time delays could mean there is nothing new to say and that the research itself might age while waiting to be published. Jones had some other recommendations for publishers: work with agents but avoid exclusive distribution deals; use new EDI standards; avoid gimmicks; electronic journals are attractive in the abstract but present the library with a whole new set of challenges and publishers should provide institutional-wide access.

The workshop ended by focusing its final session on shifting resources for the acquisition of non-print media. Moderator, Kate Wittenberg, Editor-in-Chief, Columbia University Press, introduced Michael Jensen, Electronic Publisher, Johns Hopkins University Press; Joan Grant, Collection Development Librarian, NYU; Alan Bayert, Sales Manager, *Britannica Online* to discuss how acquisition decisions are made for electronic resources, who makes them, where the money comes from, how they are ordered, the role of wholesalers and subscription agents, and current rights and fair use in the electronic environment.

Joan Grant said that she first decides whether the electronic product in question fits generally within their overall collection, regardless of format. She expects to find value-added in electronic journals over print. Once she decides the fit is right, she asks about access. Is the searching intuitive or will it require one-on-one help? Will additional workstations or special equipment be necessary? If it is Internet-based, will access be restricted during busy times of the day when the Internet is slow. Grant finds direct mail important for electronic publications (but not for traditional monographs). She likes to be able to preview and test CD-ROMs, databases, and other Internet-based products before purchase. Publishers should know that the selectors may be the ones arranging the demos, but will not be placing the actual order, nor should they receive the invoice, nor receive the final product. Other concerns voiced by Grant were site licenses, fair use (library can't police use), and the standardization of contract terms. Key issues they watch for is whether the license agreement permits fair use by authorized users with unlimited viewing and printing and includes a broad definition of authorized onsite users. Grant recommends that publishers look at the University of Texas legal counsel Web site for a description of what libraries should look for before signing licenses. Also, the University of California SunSite has a listing of what to look for when acquiring digital resources (<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Info/principles.html>).

Both Jensen and Bayert described their approach to selling *Project Muse* and *Britannica Online*, respectively. Bayert noted that the initial sale has been a long, slow process. It takes between two months and one year to finalize a contract. Most subscribers to *Project Muse* and *EBO* are through consortia. Kate Wittenberg described a joint experimental project between Columbia, Oxford, and Garland to put monographs online. These will be offered free and after a few years they will decide whether access can be sold.

If anything, this workshop had too much information packed into one day. To quote from a few of the comments on the workshop's exit survey: "Information overload (which is not the worst criticism!)." "Great idea for a workshop. Should try to 'piggyback' with Charleston Conference more often." "Very valuable — one of the most interesting days I've spent at the Charleston Conference." "I think the workshop overall was quite useful and should be held on some sort of regular basis — a continuing education course for publishers!" 